

PRESS CONFERENCE:

Dr. Tahseen al-Sheikhly, Civilian Spokesman, Operation Fardh al-Qanoon

Dr. Salih al-Hasnawi, Minister of Health

Dr. Naeema Al-Gasseer, Iraqi Representative, World Health Organization (WHO)

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PARTICIPANTS:

Dr. Tahseen al-Sheikhly

Dr. Salih al-Hasnawi

Dr. Naeema Al-Gasseer

REPORTERS 1-8

***REP1 = REPORTER 1**

***INT = INTERPRETER**

DR AL-SHEIKHLY:

[Speaks in Arabic.]

INT:

In the name of God. We are pleased to see you today to meet the local, the international press. In this conference we have the minister of health and Dr. Naeema Al-Gasseer, WHO manager in Baghdad office to discuss an important issue that is...that everyone

is talking about during the last few days. And starting from the transparency principle in delivering information, we decided today that the Iraqi government is going to deal with this topic with total frank...and of the minister of health himself. Cholera issue and all the buzz made about it in the media, and the imprecise evaluations and estimations that do not serve the interests of the citizen or the country and would spread a state of panic and concern with the citizens and with the international arena. In order to finish with this subject, we will just start with Dr. al-Hasnawi, Minister of Health, to give us a brief about the issue.

**DR Al-
HASNAWI:**

[Speaks in Arabic.]

INT:

In the name of God. As-Salāmu `Alaykum. In the country at the end of August, there have been some ca-...cholera cases detected starting with Maysan Province. Tests...assuring tests have been made at elaborate...a lab. I would just like to clarify the process. Once the patient enters the office with...complaining from the symptoms of diarrhea with no pain, it is critical, severe diarrhea case. We need to make a test...cholera test on it. In case he was suspected, the sample would be sent to a laboratory, the General Health Central Laboratory in Baghdad. It is adop-...it is sponsored by the International Health Organization. By that time we would

consider the case valid.

Just before arriving here today, we have detected 36 confirmed cases: 20 cases in Babil Province, 1 in Maysan, 13 in Karkh District in Baghdad. We had 6 but the confirmative test added 7 – 3 in Mahmudiyah, 4 in Yusufiyah. Rusafa District had 1 case coming from Kut; it was detected in Rusafa. Today we confirmed a second case in Mada'in. The suspected cases, which is clinically, gives the indication that it is cholera. We need confirmation tests there in the laboratory of the...of General Health. It is 86 cases: 20 in Maysan, they are new, suspected; 39 in Karkh suspected; 6 in Karbala; 1 in Nasiriyah; 1 in Najaf cases. All of them would cause...would make 86. The mortalities of cholera were 6 only.

The Ministry of Health, since the first day of detecting cholera case in Maysan, we have sent a technical team from the Ministry of Health with cooperation with the WHO and we have sent experts to help them as adopted by...accredited by Atlantic Center. They went to Maysan and made their tests. The procedure is like this. Once a case is detected, the team would go to the house and make the tests on the individuals living in that house. We have detected two cases from the persons living at the same house with the person infected. Two cases we have found in Karkh which is within Abu Ghraib,

Mahmudiyah, Yusifiyah. Two cases, they did not...they were not aware about it by themselves.

We also sent a delegation, also from the General Health Office. In Hillah there have been big buzz, media buzz there. Conflicted news or conflicted numbers. Only the minister of health may give statistics about infections and mortalities; only me. I was authorized...I have authorized Dr. Essan[ph] to be the official spokesman of the Ministry of Health concerning this subject. We have heard about some statements from people who are not authorized. They have spread panic among citizens. To spread the news, there is a special way that would conce-...that would aware people without giving them panic. The media side....

Cholera committee is continuing its weekly meetings until today. I have added two meetings once we have detected cholera cases. The certain procedures are we talk and exchange views then each ministry is going to do its procedures. The committee is continuing its meetings. We have sent to Hillah yesterday, a delegation from the deputy manager, the media office, and the general inspector. Today another delegation went to Hillah, also. In Hillah now, we have 19 suspected cases. The majority of them is in Hashimiyah[ph] Village. The villages there are lacking water...potable water. The

disease is epidemic in Iraq.

The statistics that we have here since the year 1990 until today, there have been some cholera cases detected but the minimum of which were in 2005. We have...we don't have any cases in 2005. 2007 we had 4,000...over 4,000 cases. 99 were, again, over 4,000. 2007 remains the biggest number. September last year...last year, this time, we had 2,894 cases. Until now, 36 confirmed cases for this year, and we have some suspected cases.

The minister give instructions to test the water, and to have ongoing reports and we have...we received the reports from our institutions. Each ministry has its own criteria we would send to the minister of municipality to the mayor. The reports, the cholera percentage in the water and whether it was potable water or not.

Also, the WHO, as a UN organization, we have here Dr. Naeema Al-Gasseer. She's their representative. She's in Baghdad. We are in direct contact with her since day one for technical support. We're waiting for experts to reach to help our technical staff in Ministry of Health during this year as minister of health due to the cases that we have seen last year as it is the biggest year with the cases. We had cooperation with WHO and the center in Atlanta to control the

diseases. We also have experts from USA to exchange information.

A very important point is the early detection of the disease. It goes from simple unto severe level. You need to...the symptoms is...might reach to dehydration and then death. Hashimiyah[ph] villagers, they are very far away from hospitals. Some of them died just before reaching the hospital. People are lack aware...health aware there. Transfer...they're not aware about the transfer of diseases.

Each...diarrhea cases are to be treated specially. We have cooperation with the municipalities ministry and we have formed a committee headed by the minister of health and the deputies of the Ministry of Environment to stop water pollution. Next week we are going to start our meetings and would submit a recommendation to the ministers' council.

DR AL-SHEIKHLY:

[Speaks in Arabic.]

INT:

Thank you for you. Thirty-six cases, only five death...mortalities. Dr. Naeema Al-Gasseer, the manager of WHO in Baghdad, she have a statement to make concerning the cooperation with the Ministry of Health in order to stop the epidemics. And we would

like to indicate that the cooperation and the efforts between the two side is very noticeable. Yes, you may go, Doctor.

DR AL-GASSEER:

[Speaks in Arabic.]

INT:

Thank you, Dr. Sheikhy. In the name of God. Thank you for your attendance today. Some of you, I know you from the previous times starting from last cholera season. I would like to ask the minister of health for his transparency. As WHO, we are concerned with applying the instructions. Iraq is a member of the executive body of the WHO and a very active member that plan the health policies.

Today we have announced the cholera spread in several provinces and Baghdad, also, and the media buzz made about it. As WHO, as I have mentioned and the minister himself assured, that our part is supporting and enhancing on a daily basis, sometimes hour to hour, especially in the health matters as they affect the citizens. We...Iraq have signed 1948 with the WHO. And as have the ministers says, we are continuing on a strategic plan. The plan...we have a message to deliver that the Ministry of Health, there are certain societies and are working together in order to stop diseases.

We would like to mention cholera is an epidemic in Iraq. It has

existed, but it is controllable. And it is possible to catch the mortalities. Our support and efforts is within.... You may go to our Web site and see weekly, we have a joint report with the WHO and the Iraqi Ministry of Health concerning the epidemic detection all over Iraq. Starting to...from districts, areas. This is within the transparency that all the governments are working with, especially Iraqi government, represented by minister of health.

Our role is emphasizing the visits. Our team went to Maysan and through this transparency we were able to witness the situation on the ground. Our role also is coordination. As WHO we coordinate with all the UN organizations as you are aware of them – UNICEF and the other. Also, the other organizations. The transparency of Ministry of Health, they always ask for technical support. They might need some clinics and some local committee might ask for certain matters. Not for certain needs, but as individuals. So this is our part. We need to detect the validity of information once there is a statement that such area, they lack of water, they lack medicine. We need to detect the validity of this information.

Also, in Babil, we have a good relation there. I would like to appraise the people there, especially health institution there. They have always controllable detection that...very rapidly they have

detected the cases. Last year it took us weeks in order to announce the first case. But this year, within less than a week in Babil, we were able to announce. This indicates the very good detection and transparency needed in these cases.

As for the continuing support, we as WHO see, as all of you heard more than once, media is very important in delivering a health message. Media can be negative affect also. Your role is to deliver the information rapidly in order to help us stop spreading the disease. As the minister has said, cholera needs rapid treatment. Once a person feels that he has diarrhea, he needs to drink lots of liquids and to go check at the nearest clinic.

As for Babil, they had all the preparations accord-...within the national plan. The problem they were facing was the potable water because some areas they did not reach water. So we need to cooperate together with the ministry and with the local community. At the end, we are ready to continue working. Now, I would like to let Dr. Sheikhly....

DR AL-SHEIKHLY:

[Speaks in Arabic.]

INT:

I would like to open the questions now.

REP1: [Asks question in Arabic.]

INT: Free Iraq Radio. Mr. Minister, you have...the cholera disease is epidemic in Iraq. All these decades you have not taken special procedures to stop this disease? Where is the role of the minister of health now to stop the cases? Who is the responsible side for spreading this disease, especially this is growing a suitable environment, which is a lack of potable water environment? Who is the responsible part in your opinion? What is your future plans? I'm sure you have future plans to stop this disease. Where is the awareness procedures through the TV channels?

DR AL-SHEIKHLY: [Speaks in Arabic.]

INT: Yes, thank you.

DR AL-HASNAWI: [Speaks in Arabic.]

INT: Thank you very much. Truly, you have talked that...you're asking me who is responsible. Providing potable water is one of the reasons...the big reason that would kill cholera. Cholera is...comes from water, from foods as you know. It is not a justification, but the infrastructure issue and the big damages of the infrastructure since the '90s until now, there are lots of accumulations.

The solution and the future plans, we are...the committee is going to have plans. We're going to have rapid procedures and strategies for the long term, for the midterm. This step is a transitional step. Since we have started as ministers' council, we have formed committees...specialized committees that was emphasize on the water quality and forming a national project to provide water. I believe this is the right step.

I don't want to throw the ball to some side, but it is a national responsibility, whether the municipalities or environment ministry. It is...we need to provide potable water. Also, the media, not only the satellite channels. You see the posters in the streets, electronic bans[?] that urge people...warns them health awareness campaigns. Also, satellite channels, yes. You're aware that the channels, you cannot control what they represent on their programs. Iraqiya, Samariyah, we have programs with them according...increasing awareness against cholera. We're working to enter the schools. And that's...it was the rights, the hygiene programs is going to be within the educational process. I believe there is some lack in our educational system concerning diseases in general, not for cholera only.

DR AL-SHEIKHLY:

[Speaks in Arabic without translation.]

REP2:

[Asks question in Arabic.]

INT:

As-Salam[ph] Satellite Channel. My question to Dr. Tahseen al-Sheikhly as he's the spokesman for Fardh al-Qanoon. Prime minister gave orders to give water tanks in the deserted areas in the villages, Western Baghdad. And with coop...we were there with the Iraqi Red Crescent and we have not received the water tanks there. Are you going to work on delivering these water tanks on the areas that are suffering from water shortages?

DR AL-SHEIKHLY:

[Speaks in Arabic.]

INT:

Yes, thank you. Mr. Prime Minister allocated 16 water tanker to be sent to the areas that are having shortage due to some cuts in the water pipe...waterline. Also, the area that you are talking about, maybe within the coming days they would reach the tank...they would receive a tanker.

Accord...the plan was made by Baghdad Operation Command. There was a water pipe that was broken. We used 13 tankers in order...in one night in order to off-...to provide potable water. This is called urgent...emergency plan. It is supporting for the services

ministries as the Ministry of Municipalities and Baghdad Municipality, they work very hard in order to provide essential needs, especially water field[?]. The Ministry of Health and Environment, both of them are working and following up the potable water in Baghdad Province and all over the provinces.

But I don't believe there is some insufficiency of the Baghdad Municipality. But the problem is infrastructure. The country, in general, the accumulations that we have here. The country needs a total rebuilt by the infrastructure. It would take lots of time. Hopefully, it would...we would make it. Yes.

REP3: [Asks question in Arabic.]

INT: Habar[ph] Agency, Bilad Radio. Mr. Minister, how come media figures, we're not allowed to enter Babil Hospital? And five individuals, you think they don't deserve media buzz? And Ministry of Health, when is it going to get all its need from medication covered? Thank you.

DR AL-HASNAWI: [Speaks in Arabic.]

INT: Frankly, today I saw newspapers that some press figures were hindered from entering Babil Hospital. But I've seen on TV that

some figures have talked...have entered the hospital and talked about it. Maybe they are...been eclectic and choosing figure.

But about the...yes. Five individuals deserves a buzz. But there's a difference between scientific approach and media buzz. The media buzz. it has maybe negative results that would affect the social life and affect the people. But I don't say that the media does not take its role. But sometimes media buzz might not be based on a true basis. Maybe you might hear people have contacted us from UK, from UAE. They have told us we are hearing hundreds are dying. Subtitles on TV shows that big numbers of mortalities. This is what we mean. We do not mean five are not worthy of our concern. Yes, they are worthy. But the precise numbers are going to give trust and confidence between the Ministry of Health and the citizen.

The shortages of medications, who said that the Ministry of Health now needs medications with an expiration to the cholera cases? WHO is present. There is this issue that the stipulations of international health, which Iraq signed on it, and we are on the executive bureau of the WHO. In all of the world there is central.... In case there is some emergency or epidemic, they pass through the Ministry of Health. We would see the local council. They would call the...directly the WHO asking them for medication. But

we...these medication are available at the Ministry of Health. They would say, yeah, well, let's increase our medication even though we have them. As you see, we have not asked for funds for medications.

Yes, we need support; we need consult; we need experts. Maybe we would need some cargos of medications urgently. It happens in everybody...in every country in the world, not only in the ministry of Iraq. They would receive.... Each country...any country would receive support from other countries.

But I believe that the medication of the Ministry of Health, if you compare it with the year 2007, we do have better medication. The infrastructure does not...is not built overnight. The Ministry of Health was built 25 or 30 years ago. As you see, we have the staff... we have...that are...our staff are returning. We need the media to stop with the Ministry of Health. We need the media figures to help us positively, to support us, to offer to spread information...correct information to help the people spread awareness among them.

DR AL-SHEIKHLY:

[Speaks in Arabic.]

INT:

I would like to comment. The media buzz, we don't mean the media

itself, but the statements made by unauthorized figures. We do not mean the media efforts. No, we are thankful for your efforts. You are first authority. You are authorized but sometimes the State might be public health law authorizes only the minister to give a statement, and he may authorize by himself any person he wishes. But, to take statements from unauthorized individuals would make some panic, would spread panic and would raise concerns. It is an ethical responsibility to spread the truth, the transparency.

REP4: [Asks question in Arabic.]

INT: Al-A'eem[ph] Agency. Doctor, there are some concerns in the Iraqi street about the spread of this disease, especially in Southern Iraq and Southern Baghdad as there is no potable water. Is the Ministry of Health going to assure the Iraqi community that it's controlling this disease?

DR AL-SHEIKHLY: [Speaks in Arabic.]

INT: If you would allow me, I would like the WHO to answer as being neutral side.

DR AL-GASSEER: [Speaks in Arabic.]

INT: Thank you. At first, as an epidemic disease, not only in Iraq but also

in Japan, as you remember, they have announced three cases; it was formal. As you have mentioned, the hygiene, the environment, we are controlling it in Iraq. But it is...as it is an epidemic, it is expected to happen in the developed countries. But to control it we mean that we would help stop its trespassing to other people. The control is with the cooperation of all sides, not only the Ministry of Health. Let's take example. As you are individual responsible at your house, if you do not control your family – how they cook food, how they wash their food, if the woman...the housewife there does not have correct information about how to deal with food – this is your responsibility. I would tell...there is a formal responsibility and local responsibility. The Ministry of Health has monitoring role to monitor the food, the restaurants, the ice-making factories, and to make the rapid information. The minister...and to report it to the ministry. We did not talk about the Parliament. They are members of the local community. They are your representatives. That's why they have a role in delivering the correct messages.

I would like to talk about the media buzz as officials at WHO and there is [unintelligible] saying this area is afflicted. We need to have a rapid intrusion. The media needs to make sure of such information. During three or four days, I was making lots of connections. Why have you announced it as an afflicted area?

[Unintelligible] the hospitals are not ready. Is it true we have hundreds of cases? How come the WHO is quiet? I'm not quiet; I'm just waiting to make sure of the situation. I cannot call everybody from the international community. I need to make sure of my information.

The health is a right from the human rights. It affects economic. The neighboring countries today are waiting from the Ministry of Health and from the WHO to announce their situation today; they're waiting from us. They have started sending messages in order for them to know about the procedures for them to be taken. Transparency is needed in this ca-...in such cases. We don't need locked areas. When you've locked it, it is something fo-...very ancient. We don't adopt such a process; we do not lock the areas, whether it was big or a country or the borders would not be locked. Travel is continuous.

But we need to change the behavior. The...we would detect the environment – water and how to deal with food and personal hygiene. I have asked the minister that the clergymen need and do have a big responsibility. They need to spread this line of cleanliness.

DR AL-SHEIKHLY:

[Speaks in Arabic without translation.]

REP5:

[Asks question in Arabic.]

INT:

Al-Farha Satellite Channel. The responsibility to stop the epidemic, it is international responsibility. But do you have coordination with Baghdad municipality on water facilities in order to control the disease in the future? Thank you.

DR AL-HASNAWI:

[Speaks in Arabic.]

INT:

Yes, at the cholera committee we have representatives from each ministry in the country. We...the minis-...the deputy prime minister, Raf[ph] Al-Visawi[ph], is now with us. We formed a committee with the Baghdad municipality and our agent is the cholera and the water problems and how to control the water-spread diseases. And we're going to have some procedures.

REP6:

[Asks question in Arabic.]

INT:

Al-Mada Newspaper. Dr. Salih. You have talked about a team is working and a committee was formed this year and the year before concerning cholera. What...when you've seen a case in Babil, it was announced in Babil. That was not announced by the Ministry of Health. Do you say there is some lack of information or lack of

coordination between Baghdad Health...between Babil Health Directory and the ministry? [Unintelligible] this case with its indicated danger as an epidemic.

DR AL-HASNAWI:

[Speaks in Arabic.]

INT:

Thank you. Babil Health Directory, we have central-based work and we have individual work. We have some institutions in order to...for the information to be spread only to subsidiary...central centers who do not have doctors, have detected cases...have detected cholera cases and they were tested and were positive. This is a very significant development. The information are supposed to be spread by the Ministry of Health. But the Ministry of Health and Environment in some provinces, some people might...and hospitals, as doctors, they might spread the news by themselves. The provincial councils now have meetings. Provincial councils now are having committees concerning cholera. They are asking...they have questions about the procedures and the precautionary procedures.

The positive incident is the cooperation of the Babil Provincial Council. The governor and his staff are cooperating. And we have coordination with them through telephone, we contact with them and when we give instruction, they do it as we say it.

And for the services committee, the person responsible for the services committee, he's the one who announces...made the announcement. The Ministry of Health did not announce because we were having a press conference and...on Thursday and I have announced it on the satellite channels. They...we've talked with the prime minister and we said there is cholera and we said we have these cholera pills and we said we have millions of pills. Then they said the Ministry of Health is keeping quiet. That's why it spread some misunderstanding.

**DR AL-
GASSEER:**

[Speaks in Arabic.]

INT:

Concerning the numbers, as Babil, the 36 cases, 20 of them in Babil, if you compare them with the last year and the previous years, it is a very rapid spread. It is to...would arise concern. We were with the Ministry of Health last week with a technical team that weren't there before announcing the alert. Yes, we need precautionary measures and we praise all the efforts of all sides based on stopping this...new cases. If the disease was epidemic in the same area last year. In some...one province we witnessed five cases. But it was epidemic. There is no announcement because it is epidemic there. We...it was not such a big number when you

compare it with the last year. We do not talk about announcing an epidemic unless it is.... Forty years, only for Iraq, we...per year, we witness 600 cases; we expect 600 cases in Iraq. This is a normal case. We do not have announcement in 2006, 200[0]...as you say. We do not make announcements because we are expecting it.

As the muni-...WHO, we work with the Ministry of Health. Each case, the person should not die due to cholera. But that's why we need awareness. Once you feel that you have diarrhea symptoms, you need to go to the closest health center and to drink lots of liquid. Five hours 'til five days, the person...within five hours was not able to reach health center, he may not...he might die. For health...each case is due to...make importance.

DR AL-SHEIKHLY:

[Speaks in Arabic.]

INT:

We have...the last four questions.

REP7:

[Speaks in Arabic.]

INT:

Al Rashid Radio. Mr. Minister, when are we going to move from defense into attack position? When are we going to kill...to stop this disease? Hashimiyah area, until yesterday, they were lacking water. The medical team that you sent went to treat and precautionary

measures, but it did not...it was not sent to solve the lack of water.

How are you going to solve this issue?

**DR AL-
HASNAWI:**

[Speaks in Arabic.]

INT:

First, I'm very grateful for your question. Thank you very much. You have very good question. We, as Ministry of Health, our strategy, through our last conference in June, our strategy was enacted and we sent it to the Ministry Council in order to give the priority...the Ministry of Health priority is precautionary. But to invest in precautionary and general health as...has long-term outcomes, not short-term outcomes. Within 10 years, our infrastructure is going to be finished for the first 8 centers and providing the treatment and the staff. The outcomes are going to be witnessed after years. Our kids, when they reach our ages, are going to have better health. We're talking within the building of our system. This strategy has long-term results.

**DR AL-
SHEIKHLY:**

[Speaks in Arabic.]

INT:

Will you please pass the mike.

REP8:

[Asks question in Arabic.]

INT:

Al Raya chief editor. As for the precautionary measures, you've

talked about the first-aid centers have campaigns of children vaccination. Do you have a vaccination now against cholera? Or do you not need such case? As for the administrative procedures done by Babil Province in stopping and dismissing some officials from working anymore, what do you say? Dr. Naeema, about the coordination with the WHO and the rest of the UN organizations, they say they have provided some needs by the local authorities. What supplies are you talking about? Thank you.

DR Al-HASNAWI:

[Speaks in Arabic.]

INT:

The vaccination campaign immunization, we call them the vaccination as you talked. It is our priority of the...within the coming years to adopt the precautionary measures. Cholera doesn't have scientific vaccination. As a community, when you witness such cases, you cannot give everybody a cholera shot. Cholera, it is very easy to kill it by boiling water, washing your hands. It is very simple once there is awareness.

We are the Ministry of Health. Yes, we do have awareness campaign. We have the...our health awareness section. We have the school health. We have...the health culture needs to be very obvious within the school programs, within the religion sectors, within the

civil communities...societies. Second point about the firing of the officials at Babil Health Directorate, they're not official there. The minister, the governor of Babil, he was making a visit and he saw some insufficiency in water institutions, lack of chlor-...or something. So he put those figures under detention because they were insufficient in doing their work.

DR AL-GASSEER:

[Speaks in Arabic.]

INT:

As for the coordination role of the WHO, today we're going to give a report. As I have mentioned, the UNICEF, not necessarily UN organizations, the international medicine committee, they said we are going to send a million pills. We know the ministry provided 10 million pills for Babil. This is from Babil. We heard it from Babil. This is what I'm talking about to make sure of the validity of your information. When you talk...when the organization give medication and then they would receive other supplies from other organization.

The UNICEF and the UN agencies are ready to meet the needs. But the supply needs to be with coordination that when you announce there is an afflicted area, they...everybody has pressure in order to work. They...all of them went and offered supplies, not necessarily

there was lack of supplies there. I have been here with you for five years. I've witnessed that the local, base cooperation, they deserve...they think of the supplies as their gifts. When you ask them, do you need? They say, yes, we need.

As for the report they...we had received, they have provided the water tankers in Babil; 5,000 pills were delivered in Maysan. We're mentioning the quantities in order to compare with the information. We need to know, did they really need it? People needed water and it was not available. We need precise information. We need detection. Some areas have received their needs. We need coordination. We always are urging not to exaggerate a situation. We need to cooperate, gather efforts.

I'm talking about the UN organizations and the public organization...the local organizations. They...we need them to cooperate, to join their efforts in awareness. We need them to deliver the same health messages and to.... Some of the reports, also, we do not want to say that we supply or offered...provided supplies. We need to know or to receive reports saying that, yes; they, indeed, needed the supplies.

DR AL-SHEIKHLY:

[Speaks in Arabic.]

INT:

Thank you, Doctor. All the efforts supporting the governmental sides, we would like to thank them. As the doctor mentioned, the coordination is very important. Thank you. Thank you very much for your attendance. I don't want to prolong. If you have a question aside from the conference, you may ask. Thank you very much. Thank you for everyone.